Urban interaction ritual

Strangership, civil inattention and everyday incivilities in public space

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Most encounters between strangers in urban public spaces involve the ritual of civil inattention (Goffman 1963). Generalized diffusion of this ritual upholds the urban interaction order. This article outlines a typology of infractions of the ritual of civil inattention, and focuses on two types: uncivil attention and uncivil inattention. Drawing on interviews ($n = 326$) about participants' most recent encounter with a rude stranger in urban public space gathered by the Researching Incivilities in Everyday Life (RIEL) Project, variations between verbally, physically, and gesturally initiated incivilities are examined. Data suggests a correlation between types of initiating move and subsequent verbal exchange. Analysis demonstrates the value of ritual framing for understanding interactional conflict between strangers, and indicates that the broader concept of incivility can supplement and extend existing impoliteness research by encompassing both linguistic and non-linguistic forms of interactional conflict.

Keywords: strangers, ritual, urban interaction order, everyday incivilities, initiating moves, public space, cultural sociology, civil inattention

1. Introduction

The copresence of multitudes of persons unknown to one another in urban public spaces provides fertile terrain for analysts of interaction. Generally, strangers in large North American cities do not explicitly interact with one another. For everyday urban life to proceed in ways that appear 'normal' and relatively orderly requires complicity between copresent strangers to not explicitly interact.

In *Behavior in Public Places*, Goffman famously posits that strangers enact the *ritual of civil inattention* (1963, 83–88), "the slightest of interpersonal rituals… that constantly regulates the social intercourse of persons in our society" (84).

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Through this ritual individuals can reasonably expect to provide to strangers, and to be provided with by strangers, a minimal kind of recognition. This form of 'just-enough' recognition – sufficient say, to avoid bumping into one another on a busy sidewalk – is what Goffman calls the "minimal courtesy of civil inattention" (1963, 86). The ritual of civil inattention is key to upholding the *urban interaction order* (Horgan 2017a), that is, the endogenous interactional organization of collective life amongst copresent strangers in public spaces. The urban interaction order, then, is a highly ritualized moral order. That said, mutual observation of the ritual of civil inattention is not guaranteed: it is discarded in rude encounters between strangers.

Building on conceptual foundations that Goffman (1967) developed out of Durkheim's (1995) analysis of the sacred character of ritual, this article revisits and re-examines Goffman's formulation of civil inattention in light of emerging ritual research in im/politeness studies (Kádár 2012) and developments in contemporary cultural sociology (Alexander 2006). Taking civil inattention as "the slightest of interpersonal rituals" (Goffman 1963, 84), this article focuses on *uncivil* encounters between strangers, which I treat as breaches of the ritual of civil inattention (often reported using the general formula, 'I was just minding my own business when …'). Using a modified form of Smith et al's (2010) 'everyday incivilities' approach, I report data from the Researching Incivilities in Everyday Life (RIEL) Project, treating as rude any encounter subjectively interpreted as rude by at least one interactant.

The RIEL dataset comprises 326 short interviews with adults about participants' most recent encounters with rude strangers in public space in Canada's most urbanized region.[1] Analysis of post-event interview data (Kádár and Haugh 2013) indicates that framing such encounters as interaction ritual infractions opens up new insights and new avenues of research that both complement and extend existing work on im/politeness. The analysis draws out some specifics of the RIEL data, and aims to illuminate the previously unlit corner where im/politeness studies, urban sociology, and cultural sociology meet. Thus, I make a specific kind of contribution to the study of ritual in im/politeness research by wedding it to contemporary research in cultural sociology. My argument underpins the analytic promise and value of a ritual approach to the study of im/politeness and closely related phenomena.

1. Participants were drawn from the Canada's Greater Golden Horseshoe region, a highly urbanized area incorporating several cities with a total population of 9.2 million and projected to grow to 11.5 million by 2031 (Statistics Canada 2016; Ontario Ministry of Infrastructure 2013). This area constitutes about 0.2% of Canada's territory, yet houses over 25% of the total population.

I begin by briefly reviewing sociological research on stranger interactions, and relevant work in im/politeness research. Then a short discussion of complementarities between ritual theory in sociology and research on ritual in im/politeness research follows. I suggest that attention to the ritual of civil inattention opens up a larger class of phenomena than those analyzed in existing im/politeness research. Drawing on underexplored possibilities of civil sphere theory in cultural sociology (Alexander 2006), I outline a basic typology of urban interaction ritual, honing in on two main types of breaches of the ritual of civil inattention: *uncivil attention* and *uncivil inattention*. From there, I turn to the RIEL dataset to describe variations between uncivil encounters that are initiated in different ways, focusing in particular on uncivil encounters that are *verbally initiated* and *physically initiated*. To conclude, I suggest that, in light of the RIEL data, the possibilities of a ritual focus in im/politeness studies open the subfield up to new insights from urban sociology and cultural sociology.[2]

2. Cities, strangers, and im/politeness

2.1 The distinct realm of urban interaction

"Social interaction can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more persons are physically in one another's response presence" (Goffman 1983, 2).

The particularities of collective life in cities provide analysts of social interaction with a rich vein to mine. Almost a century ago, sociologist Louis Wirth noted that urbanism is a "distinctive mode of human group life", offering a "minimal definition" of the city "as a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals" (1938, 8). Where this "minimal definition" of urbanism's "distinctive mode of human group life" (1938, 8) overlaps with Goff-

2. Before more fully situating the present research in the extant literature, a quick note on nomenclature. Like most fields of social scientific research, terminological debates proliferate in impoliteness research (Bargiela-Chiappini 2003; Bousfield and Culpeper 2008; Kienpointner 1997; Limberg 2009). While the term *impoliteness* is in more general usage in pragmatics, in this article I favor the broader term *incivility* (see also Sifianou 2019). This is for three main reasons. First, to make explicit reference to Goffman's (1963) concept of civil inattention; second, to hew close to the everyday incivilities approach (Smith et al. 2010) which falls under the broader rubric of contemporary cultural sociology; and third, to incorporate a wider range of phenomena than those analyzed in existing research on impoliteness between copresent persons. Each of these justifications will become clearer as the argument develops. Another manuscript under preparation develops fuller justification for this conceptually consequential terminological shift.

man's attunement to what "uniquely transpires" (1983, 2) when persons are copresent, we find that slice of intersubjective reality termed the "urban interaction order" (Horgan 2017a; 2019). Like the interaction order in general, the urban interaction order is a "substantive domain in its own right" (Goffman 1983, 2).

This distinct realm of urban interaction between strangers animates much of Goffman's work (1963, 1971). "To grasp some aspects of urban secular living" (1967, 95), he employed "a version of urban ethnography" (Goffman and Verhoeven 1980, 318). In this spirit, interactionally attuned sociologists emphasize the particularity of the interactional dynamics characterizing types of social contact between strangers in urban public spaces (Duneier and Molotch 1999; Lofland 1973; Morrill et al. 2005; Raudenbush 2012).

While recent work in pragmatics and related fields has also developed new methods for analysis of public interaction between strangers (Mondada 2009; Smith 2017), as discussed below, encounters between copresent persons with no prior knowledge of one another outside of institutional or service settings have largely escaped the attention of im/politeness researchers.

2.2 The relative absence of copresent strangers from im/politeness research

Impoliteness research began to cohere within a decade of Brown and Levinson's (1987) foundational work on politeness with Culpeper's (1996) delineation of the "anatomy of impoliteness". Since that time, impoliteness research has grown remarkably with great variation in focus (Bousfield 2008; 2010; Bousfield & Culpeper 2008; Bousfield & Locher 2008; Culpeper 2011; Culpeper et al. 2017; Locher & Graham 2010; Terkourafi 2012; Watts 2009). Though the body of research on impoliteness is now both extensive and diverse, many arenas of social life – including impoliteness between copresent strangers – remain underexplored.

For Leech, "conflictive illocutions tend, thankfully, to be rather marginal to human linguistic behaviour in normal circumstances" (1983, 105; see also Watts 2009, 5).[3] Similarly, Culpeper reports that impoliteness "casts a much larger shadow than its frequency of usage would suggest … Behaviours and expressions considered impolite are more noticed and discussed than politeness" (2010, 3239). RIEL data digs down on this apparently marginal class of phenomena, adopting the everyday incivilities approach to analyze these often minor annoyances that

3. Contextual cues facilitating Leech's "banter principle" (1983) may not be fully operational the urban interaction order, as banter depends primarily on at least loosely bounded groups with some sort of explicitly shared bond (for example, on friendship groups, see Vergis and Terkourafi 2015; on "mock impoliteness" between familiars, see Dynel and Poppi 2019).

are part of the humdrum of everyday urban life. Uncivil encounters are likely much less frequent than civil ones, but this does not mean that uncivil encounters are rare; over a quarter of RIEL participants reported an uncivil encounter with a stranger within the previous week, and well over a half within the previous four weeks.

Research focused *exclusively* on copresent strangers is underrepresented in im/politeness research, though related research focuses on linguistic differences. For example, Barros García and Terkourafi (2014) treat strangers as those who do not share a language. and Mondada (2018) examines how initial greetings establish what language will be used in multilingual settings (see also Culpeper 2010). Similarly, im/politeness research tends to focus on settings where there is an explicit social connection – whether affective or instrumental – such as in workplaces, or in institutional and service circumscribed exchanges (Bousfield 2007; 2018). Incivilities occurring in workplaces and in the everyday functioning of institutions may differ from those occurring between strangers in public space, where rules of behavior between physically copresent others are less institutionally circumscribed.[4] Additionally, recent im/politeness research has seen a significant shift from a focus on face-to-face interaction towards online and technologically mediated interaction (Bou-Franch & Blitvich 2014; Graham 2019; Jay 2018; Locher 2010; Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018). While this is important research, the interactional worlds populated and produced by *copresent* persons remain vast and underexplored.

Attention to uncivil encounters between strangers beyond institutional and service provision encounters expands the orbit of im/politeness studies. In the spirit of eclecticism and curiosity that characterize im/politeness research (Bousfield and Culpeper 2008), this article widens the lens from impoliteness to incivility (Sifianou 2019), shedding new light on familiar phenomena.

2.3 Stranger interactions beyond im/politeness research

Im/politeness research is not alone in overlooking the distinctiveness of interactions between copresent strangers. Stranger interactions prove analytically troublesome in many areas. For example, foundational studies of initial interaction in work groups and institutional settings relied on hypothetical situations and on interactions leading to ongoing contact rather than one-off encounters (Berger and Calbrese 1975). Some research in pragmatics examines phatic talk between strangers, though this tends to be under experimental conditions (Flint et al.

4. For example, Bousfield (2007) provides an astute analysis of the problems traffic wardens face in public interaction.

2019), or in institutional rather than public spaces (Edmondson and House 1981; House 2013). Other work on encounters between strangers focuses on the intentional search for connection – in speed dating, for example (Korobov 2011; Stokoe 2010) – or on encounters oriented towards future cooperation (Svennevig 2014). Beyond sociology there is little research on interactions between strangers in public spaces who *remain* as strangers.

In social psychology related research on rudeness has also grown significantly over the last two decades, tending to connect rudeness and aggression (Hamilton 2012), or focusing on predicting rudeness by way of personality traits, often through analysis of interaction in the laboratory rather than naturally occurring interaction (Ickes 2009; Ickes et al. 2012). There also exists an extensive literature on workplace incivility (Leiter 2013).

Overall, research on uncivil encounters between strangers has been given short shrift. Studies of interaction between strangers tend to treat it as a precursor for the development of stronger ties and/or a shared task orientation. Fleeting encounters between strangers in public space who continue as strangers to one another remain under-analyzed.

While im/politeness research has advanced our understanding of linguistically mediated interactional conflict, the RIEL data reported below suggests that not all interactions between strangers are linguistically initiated or mediated (Sifianou & Tzanne 2010). So, while the properties of linguistic incivilities are well described (and debated) in im/politeness research, my analysis differs in several ways by;

- examining uncivil encounters between copresent strangers beyond institutional settings and service encounters in urban public spaces,
- treating impoliteness as linguistic incivility, a subset of incivility more generally
- not assuming continued post-encounter contact
- taking seriously ritual dimensions of stranger interactions

While focusing on the particularity of uncivil encounters between strangers in public space is a very specific subset of impoliteness in general, as I show here, examining everyday incivilities between strangers opens broader classes of interactional phenomena to analysis.

Since civil inattention is here treated as interaction ritual (Goffman 1967), a focused discussion of ritual is warranted.

3. Ritual dimensions of expressive social activity

"[R]itual is not a *type* of activity that can be set off from the rest of the world for special investigation. It is a *dimension* of all social activity" (Wuthnow 1989, 101, emphasis in original).

Rituals both "evoke and communicate meanings" (Wuthnow 1989, 99). They provide means for assigning meaning to persons and relations. As forms of expressive social activity, successful rituals communicate the communal value or worth of persons and relations (Durkheim 1995). Shared willingness to abide by ritual forms – to enact and sustain ritual smoothness and consistency – expresses common values (Collins 2005; Alexander 2004b) and affirms individual status and worth (Goffman 1967).

Following Wuthnow, we move from a restricted view of ritual as formal rite separate from everyday life, towards understanding ritual dimensions of all social interaction. This shifts us from a conception of ritual as a formally bounded activity to a broader view using ritual framing in everyday social interaction. This approach is clear in work on interaction ritual (Goffman 1967), more recently elaborated in interaction ritual theory, focused on ritual's "emotional ingredients" (Collins 2005, 105), especially *mutual entrainment*, in the ritual production of collective effervescence. While it is the strongest ritually generated expression of collectivity, it is unnecessary to go so far as the intensity of Durkheim's collective effervescence to find mutuality in ritual: mutuality is central to ritual dimensions of all interaction (Horgan 2017b).

Mundane manifestations of ritual have long exercised students of social interaction. For some, deviation from ritual form signifies abnormality. For example, in diagnostic settings, Laing notes that "[r]itualization is a formal patterning of the encounter" (1966, 334) between psychiatrist and patient. Because ritual is expressive, it centers on meaning, and so, in the therapeutic encounter, provides patients with opportunities for "destructuring…the usual social structure of communication", toppling the ritual form by refusing to use "socially shared signals" (1966, 332; on ritual affronts see also Goffman 1967, 89; Culpeper 2010).

Ritual, then, is expressive and provides a means for willful symbolic denigration of another person. While the meta-communicative dimensions of ritual affronts are beyond the purview of the current study, of value is recognition that shared reference points can be mobilized to deny mutuality. Without mutual commitment from interactants, common ground is easily discarded. Thus, interaction rituals have a social contractual basis – albeit an informal one – and by not questioning the arbitrary nature of ritualized conventions in interaction, the business of everyday life gets done (Collins 2005, 104; Garfinkel 1967; Terkourafi and Kádár 2017). Strangers in public space usually offer one another civil inattention, and in

most cases this offer is mutually honored. Nonetheless, the ritual dimensions of encounters between strangers make ritual infraction an ever-present possibility.

3.1 Civil inattention as urban interaction ritual

As a widely experienced form of urban interaction, civil inattention occurs with more regularity than the "mere exchange of friendly glances" (Goffman 1963, 101). Indeed, civil inattention is "the *most frequent* of our interpersonal rituals" (1963, 101, emphasis added), involving a restricted range of attentional adjustment whereby "one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him [sic]), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention…so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design" (Goffman 1963, 84). So, while civil inattention "is perhaps the slightest of interpersonal rituals…[it is] one that constantly regulates the social intercourse of persons in our society" (1963, 84). Our core thematic concern, then, is ritualized urban interaction – here termed, *urban interaction ritual*.

Shared commitment to civil inattention through the mutual indifference of strangers makes ordinary everyday urban life amongst strangers possible (Durkheim 1964; Horgan 2017a; 2017b; Simmel 1971). My analysis delineates variations in the ways that basic breaches of the ritual of civil inattention play out. While I am mindful of and have much to say about them, I leave aside entirely more macro and ontogenetic questions about the relationship between interactional ritual and moral order more generally.[5] Before outlining the typology, the next section considers the place of ritual in im/politeness research and cultural sociology.

3.2 Ritual at the intersection of im/politeness research and cultural sociology

While pragmatics in general, and im/politeness research in particular, find conceptual footing in general social theory, connections between them are underelaborated.[6] Recent research on ritual in im/politeness studies provides opportu-

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5. For an outline of the normative foundations underpinning stranger interactions – 'moral affordances' – and a basic conceptual schema for delineating the relationship between interaction ritual and moral order, see Horgan (2019).

6. For example, while Brown and Levinson draw upon the work of Giddens to justify their interest in the "triviata of everyday life" (Giddens 1973, 15 cited in Brown and Levinson 1987, 239), they do not delve into how Giddens's interest in such 'triviata' connects to his broader the-

nities for enhanced connections, though work in this vein too replicates some of the oversights of im/politeness research noted above. For example, Kádár (2013) focuses on ritual breaches or 'destructive rituals' in formalized or in-group contexts. Stranger interactions remain underscrutinized, and since they rely upon minimal common ground, they pose an important analytic challenge.

Throughout Goffman's oeuvre, public conduct – particularly stranger encounters – appears as a morally loaded domain of interaction, where the sanctity of persons manifests and is affirmed (see especially, 1963; 1971). For Goffman, this sanctity is made and renewed through interaction ritual. Following Durkheim, Collins notes that "rituals are the source of the group's standards of morality" (2005, 39): it is within ritual that a sense of what is civil and what is uncivil is made manifest. It is here that cultural sociology enters the fray.

In connecting ritual and social order, cultural sociologists foreground some problems confronting ritual in the context of complex social organization where little common ground might be shared (Alexander 2004b; Alexander et al. 2006). Like Goffman, Alexander bases his conception of ritual on Durkheim's (1995) late work.

> Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication's symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another's intentions … Contemporary societies revolve around open-ended conflicts between parties who do not necessarily share beliefs, frequently do not accept the validity of one another's intention, and often disagree even about the descriptions that people offer for acts.
>
> (Alexander 2004b, 527)

Alexander suggests that successful ritual performance is increasingly difficult in societies characterized by higher degrees of social and cultural complexity. Thus, contemporary multicultural urban environments – animated by density and heterogeneity along multiple axes of social difference – provide fertile ground for examining ritual dimensions of interaction between strangers.

My micro-application of civil sphere theory (Alexander 2006; see also Alexander 2004a, 2004b) shows how everyday actors' interpretations of one another's conduct operate through a basic symbolic classification of action into a discursive binary of civil/uncivil. As Alexander demonstrates, "the civility of the self always articulates itself in language about the incivility of the other" (2006,

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ory of structuration. Similarly, they reference Durkheim's conception of the sacred, but leave aside the fact that his theory of collective life hinges on the concept (Horgan 2019b).

50). Along these lines, ritual breach precipitates lay adjudication of when and how civil inattention becomes uncivil (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

4. Urban interaction ritual: A typology

To ring-fence interactional phenomena of analytic interest, we are concerned with violations of codes of civility (Alexander 2006) and "attentional norms" (Zerubavel 2015, 59). Framed using the ritual of civil inattention, we generate four basic types of stranger encounter, organized into an urban interaction ritual typology. These four types are: civil inattention, civil attention, uncivil inattention, and uncivil attention (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Urban interaction ritual typology: Four types of interaction between strangers in urban public spaces.*

	Civil	**Uncivil**
Inattention	Mutual indifference; stabilized urban interaction order; norm of conduct between strangers (Goffman 1963)	Non-mutual indifference; non-person treatment; generalized carelessness, with payload, for example, or barging in a lineup (Goffman 1959; Lankenau 1999; Smith et al. 2010, 181–182)
Attention	Acceptable requests for assistance; legitimate use of access information; civil sociability (Anderson 2011; Kendrick and Drew 2016)	Unsolicited commentary; leering; explicit directed threat or violence; illegitimate use of access information (Gardner 1980, 1988, 1995)

* While others also use the terminology in this table (e.g. Smith 1997; Sznaider 2001), my usage of the terms 'attention' and 'inattention' aligns with Zerubavel (2015).

Here I provide a brief summary of each type, before focusing in particular on uncivil inattention and uncivil attention.

1. *Civil inattention*
   While dealt with extensively above, to briefly recap, civil inattention refers to the interaction ritual between strangers who implicitly agree to not engage in focused interaction (Goffman 1963, 135; 1967, 144–145). This ritual permeates the urban interaction order, and is the most frequent kind of interaction between strangers in public space.
2. *Civil attention*
   Civil attention extends from diffuse mutually aware recognition between copresent persons (e.g. giving an approaching stranger room to pass on a sidewalk) to more explicit breaches of civil inattention, where mutual respect is

demonstrated and maintained. For example, A attends to B in a way that is helpful, or in response to a request for assistance (Kendrick and Drew 2016; Wesselman et al. 2012). Examples here include desisting from barging in a crowd, legitimate use of access information like providing a stranger with directions, or assisting someone with payload. It may also extend to convivial interactions between strangers (Jackson et al. 2017; Valentine 2008), in the 'cosmopolitan canopy' (Anderson 2011). Key here is that the interaction is mutually legitimated, and so does not constitute an uncivil act.

3. *Uncivil inattention*
   Uncivil inattention refers to generalized rather than directed uncivil conduct. In cases of uncivil inattention, A acts without regard for B's presence. Mutual indifference is thrown off-kilter, and the indifference of one interactant impinges on another's right to use public space unencumbered, through 'non-mutual indifference' (Horgan 2017a, 78). Examples include queue skipping, barging, or carelessness with payload (Smith et al. 2010), and may extend to cases where A initiates interaction with B and B fails to engage, such as in cases of ignoring requests for assistance. For our purposes, whether or not such conduct is deemed to be uncivil is a matter of how it is interpreted by one who is infringed upon.
4. *Uncivil attention*
   This type incorporates most of the interactional phenomena lay persons might consider rude or impolite. Here A violates the ritual of civil inattention by explicitly making B their focus of attention, and B views this as uncivil. Here the offender is an unwelcome participant in interaction, who directs their attention to a stranger who would otherwise reasonably expect the ritual of civil inattention to be maintained. An example of uncivil attention is gendered street harassment, particularly "unsolicited commentary" (Gardner 1995; see also Smith 1997).[7]

Two types of breaches of the ritual of civil inattention concern us here: uncivil attention and uncivil inattention. In the RIEL dataset, the threshold between civil and uncivil conduct – the point where conduct slips from one side to the other – is an interpreted one. How, then, do we determine what an uncivil encounter is and, how do we gather data on such interactional phenomena? These are questions that the RIEL Project addresses directly.

7. With respect to uncivil attention, there is an entire set of historical cases that are worthy of scrutiny in their own right, particularly in terms of the political uses to which lay adjudications of action are put in service of discriminatory practice. While I cannot do justice to the intricacies of these phenomena here, on the historical uses of ritual and racialized judgements of civility in the US South, for example, see Harris (1995).

5. *Researching Incivilities in Everyday Life* (RIEL) project data

5.1 Data and methodology

"Data is a major problem for impoliteness research" (Culpeper 2010, 3241). Naturally occurring data is notoriously difficult to collect, and this may partly explain the tendency in im/politeness research to seek out impoliteness phenomena in publicly available online interactions and in contrived situations on television (for example. Culpeper 2005; Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018). Existing research on strangers in public space tends to rely on observation and analysis of naturally occurring interaction (Lofland 1998; Smith 2017), rather than on how interactants interpret the conduct of others. As subjectively interpreted phenomena, uncivil encounters are not amenable to objective measurement through naturalistic observation or video data of naturally occurring interaction.

To address this shortcoming, RIEL Project methodology builds upon the 'everyday incivilities' approach developed by Smith et al. (2010) in the Everyday Life in Australia Survey (ELIAS). ELIAS researchers accessed "civil relations in public" (14) by conducting telephone survey research to examine demographic, spatio-temporal, and emotional aspects of everyday experiences of incivility. Adapting and extending this methodology, RIEL researchers systematically solicited accounts of uncivil encounters with strangers in Canada's most urbanized region through short face-to-face interviews ($n = 326$).[8] Thus, RIEL Project data consists of *post hoc* accounts that provide details of the genesis and content of specific uncivil encounters.

Interview guides were initially piloted in 2014, and interview data was then collected in four waves between 2015 and 2018. Interviews begun with questions to gather participants' demographic information. Participants ranges in age from 18 to 72, with an average age of 27. 66% of participants identified as women. Demographic questions were followed by detailed questions about participants' 'most recent encounter with a rude stranger in public space',[9] including basic spatio-

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8. Interviews were conducted under the author's supervision by sociology students trained in qualitative research methods as part of a multi-step course assignment which included transcribing the interviews verbatim. All elements of data gathering were approved by the University Research Ethics Board.

9. Three types of encounters between strangers in public spaces were excluded: (1) encounters where both parties were drivers were excluded due to the "limited expressive equipment" (Katz 1999) afforded to interactants by automobiles; (2) provider-client service encounters were omitted as service roles circumscribe the course of such encounters, particularly their inherent – and often automatic – asymmetry that builds subordination and superordination into ascribed provider-client roles. They thus lack the presumption of interactional equality that pertains, at

temporal data on the uncivil encounter (e.g. physical location, time of day, duration), and open-ended questions designed to solicit detailed accounts. Interviews ranged in length from 10 to 30 minutes. Transcriptions generated a corpus of over 500,000 words, and were coded by the author and one research assistant. A random sample of 15 interviews were cross-checked for inter-coder reliability. Numerical data from the survey-type questions (demographics, time of day, number of turns) was categorized and tabulated, while qualitative data was coded and analyzed to examine patterns and types of uncivil interactions.

5.2 The civil/uncivil line: Interpreting interaction ritual breaches

In general, breaching the ritual of civil inattention means crossing a culturally proscribed – thus also historically and situationally variable – line from civil to uncivil. The *in situ* lay classification of conduct aligns with culturally available meanings organized around a basic sacred/profane binary (Alexander 2004a; Durkheim 1995). This binary provides a system of classification through which everyday actors can interpret the actions of others (Alexander 2006). Simply put, civility is deemed sacred and threats to it profane. Because conduct is interpreted, the breaches dealt with here are specific instances where at least one party in an encounter deems another's conduct to be uncivil.

In the spirit of 'second-wave' im/politeness research (Eelen 2001; Watts 2009), the everyday incivilities perspective (Smith et al. 2010), and cultural sociology more generally, an act is treated as uncivil if it is interpreted as such by an interactant. In fleeting conduct between strangers in public space, intention cannot necessarily be determined, but rather is socially ascribed (Blum and McHugh 1971; Mills 1940; Scott and Lyman 1968). In this formulation, the intention behind an uncivil act is of less relevance than its interpretation (Culpeper 2011, 23; Locher & Watts 2005): no encounter is in itself inherently uncivil, rather it must be *interpreted* by one or more consociates (Schutz 1970) as uncivil. Thus, we treat as uncivil, stranger encounters where at least one party to the encounter interprets some behavior as crossing from civil to uncivil conduct.

All incivilities cross a civil/uncivil line, and many also cross an attentional line. The two ways that civil inattention can be breached are represented in Figure 1.

In the context of an encounter between two or more strangers in urban space where norms of civil inattention prevail, an incivility is any act – whether verbal,

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least in principle, between strangers in public settings (Horgan 2012); (3) also excluded were artistic interventions explicitly engineered to disrupt quotidian urban life (Bourriard 2002; Liinamaa 2014, 533).

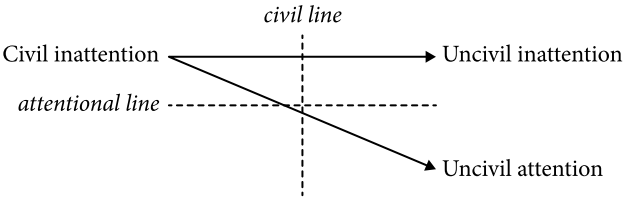


Figure 1. Incivilities crossing civil and attentional lines

gestural, physical, or any combination of these – adjudicated by one or more co-present persons to be outside the bounds of conduct deemed civil. While incivility may include a verbal exchange, not all uncivil encounters do. Thus, incivility is (1) interactionally produced, (2) evaluative, and (3) incorporates – but is neither exclusively rooted in, nor reducible to – linguistic exchange.

In 30% ($n=97$) of reported cases, participants' most recent encounter with a rude stranger involved an encounter coded as uncivil inattention (see Table 2 below). These cases involve conduct that participants reported as rude which was not directed – initially at least – at another individual in particular. Such conduct reported in the data includes, for example, carelessness with payload (such as backpacks on public transit), shoving in crowded spaces, use of profane language within earshot of young children, and loud conversation about sexual exploits on public transit. Of these 97 cases, 12% began as an incident of uncivil inattention, and then became an incident of uncivil attention, or, put more simply, such cases involved incidents where a stranger's conduct was uncivil in general before being directed to a particular person.

Table 2. Frequency of type of uncivil conduct

	Frequency	**%**
Uncivil attention	229	70
Uncivil inattention	97	30
Total	**326**	**100**

Thus we find that while cases where strangers direct their uncivil attention towards a particular person constitute the majority (70%) of cases, almost one third of cases involve general – that is, non-directed – incivilities best understood as uncivil inattention.

While the RIEL data provides dozens of other dimensions for comparison and correlation, in the remaining space I highlight core observations from a slice of the data that has direct bearing on im/politeness research, namely, variation between types of incivilities initiated in different ways.

6. Initiating moves in uncivil encounters

The *genesis* of uncivil encounters remains poorly understood, so here I attend to similarities and differences between *verbally* and *non-verbally initiated* incivilities. The initiating move refers to the type of opening move – whether verbal, gestural, physical, or any combination of these – that RIEL participants reported in their most recent uncivil encounter with a stranger.

Verbally initiated incivilities involve opening moves that are verbal. Those reported in RIEL interviews include strangers directing racial slurs at passers-by, cat calling, and unsolicited commentary. Physically initiated incivilities involve forms of encroachment where the initial incivility results from physical contact, including allowing a door to close in someone's face or and bumping into someone without apology. Gesturally initiated incivilities do not involve physical contact, but include eye-rolling, prolonged staring, and dirty looks. Examples of incivilities that were simultaneously initiated verbally and physically included pushing and shouting in crowded spaces, and aggressively using a baby stroller while yelling. Table 3 reports the distribution of different types of initiating moves across the RIEL data.

Table 3. Distribution of types of initiating moves

Initiating move	Count	%
Verbal	146	45
Physical	104	32
Verbal + Physical	44	13.5
Gestural	24	7
Other combination	8	2.5
Total	**326**	**100**

While verbally initiated incivilities – the main focus of impoliteness research – are the most frequently occurring, in 40% ($n=129$) of reported incivilities, initiation was non-verbal, that is, gestural and/or physical. Thus, many instances of reported incivility were initiated without words. This suggests that the existing linguistic focus of impoliteness research may miss important data.

6.1 From initiation to escalation

From here, the next question is whether or not the type of initiating move appears to relate in any way to subsequent moves in the encounter. We asked RIEL participants to describe any escalation in the encounter, and specifically to recount any verbal exchange that ensued following the initiating move.

Table 4. Prevalence of reported verbal exchange by initiating move

Initiating Move	Exchange % (frequency)	No exchange % (frequency)
Verbal	65% (95)	35% (51)
Physical	40% (42)	60% (62)
Gestural	42% (10)	58% (14)
Verbal & physical	82% (36)	18% (8)
Other combination*	75% (6)	25% (2)
Total	**58% (189)**	**42% (137)**

* Given their relative infrequency these cases are omitted from the analysis that follows

Here we see that 58% of reported incivilities involved subsequent verbal exchange following the initial uncivil act, while 42% involved no subsequent exchange. Examples of the latter include rude comments that go unanswered, unchallenged queue-jumping, and leering that is ignored. Significantly, the type of initiating move appears to be related to the likelihood of exchange. Incivilities that are either physically or gesturally initiated are the least likely to generate any form of verbal exchange (40% and 42% respectively), while 65% of those that were verbally initiated led to further exchange. Over one-third of verbally initiated incivilities involve no verbal exchange. Notably, those encounters that appear most likely to escalate are those that are initiated *both* verbally and physically, with 82% of such incivilities involving some subsequent verbal exchange. For example, a shouting queue jumper appears to invite more verbal response than a silent one. In terms of the likelihood of escalation, then, the initiating move appears to be impactful.

When we dig down into this data, some interesting patterns emerge. Taking a slightly different tack, we scrutinized the extent of exchange following the initiating move. To do this we asked participants to recall as much detail about any form of verbal exchange that occurred in their most recent encounter with a rude stranger. As reported in Table 5 below, when there were verbal exchanges, most were very brief. For example, one participant recounts a verbally initiated incivility that involved no subsequent exchange when she accidentally dropped her books while walking through a doorway into a public building:

> there was a person behind me … I guess they were in a hurry … The guy just said, "what are you doing, get out of my way" … I thought it was rude because he either could have gone around me or help me pick it up … I just picked up my books and … just got out of the way and let him through (RIEL#18016)

Another participant recounts walking in a pedestrianized area early in the morning:

> I walked past someone, I was texting on my phone, and we came pretty close to knocking into each other. And he yelled at me to watch where I was going and then continued on his way … I yelled … back at him … "go 'f' yourself".
>
> (RIEL#16040)

While these exchanges were short, others were more protracted. For example, in another case of verbally initiated incivility, a white woman reports walking through a shopping mall with her Mexican partner:

> we had a man come up to us and he looked at us and he said he was disgusted that me, being a Caucasian, could be with someone of a different background, and that I should be with someone who is a Caucasian … I told the man that he should keep his views to himself … and he shouldn't walk up to random strangers and basically verbally abuse them … I told him to 'have a nice day, carry on as you will, like we're not affecting you, we aren't doing anything other than what two Caucasians would be doing', and he … scoffed at me. (RIEL#18066)

Another example, of more extensive and intense escalation happened as a young white man left a busy downtown bar:

> it was a weekend so obviously there was people drinking and everything … there was two guys as I was walking to my truck … and in passing they started saying vulgar things, rude things, egging me on trying to start fight and it escalated to pushing, shoving, them being again very vulgar and then, I sort of de-escalated it and walked back to my truck where I had 3 friends of mine waiting … As we went to pull away, these guys came back … they started kicking the truck and hitting it … Eventually we got fed up, we all stepped out of the truck and … again at first, trying to de-escalate the situation, these guys were just not cooperating at all. They were trying to mouth off and everything and so one of my larger friends … decided to get physical with him and just shoved him away and pushed him and eventually they just backed off …

In an example of a physically-initiated incivility, a group of white women are waiting in a lineup at a bustling bar:

> there was nowhere to move, and there was this guy that was standing in front of us…He was pushing us and shoving us, and we had like nowhere to go and he was just being very physical with us…at first we didn't really do anything, like there was nothing that we could really do…there was nowhere we could move, we were being pushed from behind, and I was pushing this guy, but it wasn't me it was everyone behind me. So I was trying my best to not push him but he was just pushing back so hard, so I let it go for 10 minutes, but then it was getting ridiculous, he was using so much unnecessary force, and then he ended elbowing my friend in the face and I was like 'okay this is enough, like you need to relax'…he actually told us to 'fuck off' so…he had like no remorse at all.

These examples illustrate that some incivilities involve brief and minor escalation, while others are more extended and serious. Data reported in Table 5 shows the distribution of initiating moves by extent of subsequent verbal exchange. Here, initiating moves are categorized into the four most frequently occurring types: verbal; physical; gestural; verbal & physical.[10]

For coding purposes, number of turns refers to the total number of turns involved in the exchange following the initiating move. Thus, the column headed *None* includes all cases where there was only an initiating move, with no further response; *One* includes all cases involving a single verbal response to the stranger's initiating move by the participant; *Two* includes all cases where exchange ended with the initiator verbally replying to the participant's response; *Three* includes all cases where exchange ended with the participants' second response. Subsequent responses beyond two turns each are collapsed into the column labeled *Four+*.[11]

Table 5. Type of initiating move by number of subsequent verbal turns *

	None	One	Two	Three	Four+	Total
Verbal	35% (51)	20% (29)	12% (18)	3% (4)	30% (44)	100% (146)
Physical	59.6% (62)	12.5% (13)	16.3% (17)	2.9% (3)	8.7% (9)	100% (104)
Gestural	58% (14)	21% (5)	13% (3)	0% (0)	8% (2)	100% (24)
Verbal & Physical	18% (8)	7% (3)	16% (7)	18% (8)	41% (18)	100% (44)
All cases	42% (135)	16% (50)	14% (45)	5% (15)	23% (73)	100% (318)

* Due to rounding, not all rows sum to 100%.

Here we see that, when they occur, verbal exchanges in physically and gesturally initiated incivilities tend to be short, with only 8.7% and 8% respectively extending to four or more turns. In contrast, almost one third of verbally initiated uncivil encounters extend to four or more turns, while 41% of encounters initiated verbally and physically involve such protracted series of verbal exchange. In the RIEL data then we find that initiating moves that combine verbal and physical elements tend to correlate with longer verbal exchanges.

Clearly, further research into these variations is merited if we are to develop a fuller picture of the landscape of uncivil encounters between strangers in public

10. Eight cases – making up 3% of the total – involve other combinations and are omitted from the following analysis due to their relative infrequency.

11. Because we rely on participants' capacity to recall details of any verbal exchange, in piloting our interview guides we found that participants had difficulty recounting precisely what was said beyond the fourth turn, and so instances of four or more turns are grouped together.

spaces. The opportunities for future research here are wide ranging. As a beginning, this article offers an empirically grounded understanding of how linguistic and non-linguistic forms of incivility differ from one another. This warrants further scrutiny, especially given that non-verbally initiated incivilities make up 40% of the RIEL data.

It would seem pertinent then to investigate further where the formal similarities between linguistic and non-linguistic incivilities begin and end. The prevalence of non-verbally initiated incivilities may warrant that research on ritual in im/politeness research be complemented also by research on multimodal interaction.

7. Conclusion

Drawing on the possibilities of ritual research in impoliteness research, this article adopted and modified the everyday incivilities framework to examine uncivil encounters between strangers in urban public spaces. Beginning with a brief examination of the realm of interaction between persons unknown to one another in public space as a distinctive interaction order – one underscrutinized in im/politeness research – I showed how the urban interaction order is maintained through strangers' mutual commitment to the interpersonal ritual of civil inattention. Then, I discussed how failures in maintaining civil inattention can be fruitfully analyzed as ritual infractions. Drawing on conceptual tools from cultural sociology, I developed a typology of urban interaction rituals, organized around breaches of civil and/or attentional norms.

Empirically grounding this conceptual work, I reported RIEL Project data, outlining the prevalence of two types of incivility: uncivil attention and uncivil inattention, showing the former to be over twice as prevalent as the latter. From there I demonstrated how the type of initiating move in uncivil encounters appears to correlate with the likelihood of escalation and verbal exchange, finding that physically initiated incivilities are much less likely than verbally initiated ones to involve verbal exchange. Perhaps most interestingly, over four out of five uncivil encounters that are simultaneously physically and verbally initiated involve verbal exchange.

Opportunities for further research are legion. Considering the broader palette of ways that interactional conflict between strangers emerges, flares up, and recedes will contribute new insights in linguistic approaches to conflict resolution (Bousfield 2007; Evans et al. 2019). This also fits well with increased attention to context in im/politeness research (Bousfield and Culpeper 2008, 161; Culpeper & Terkourafi 2017). Additionally, while not dealt with in this article, discerning how

various kinds of social category membership (gender, race, and class, for example) figure in stranger interactions would be valuable (Khan 2019). This would require focused and sustained research that attends to how and for whom specific category membership figures in the character and course of stranger interactions gone awry.

Interactions between strangers of the more storied kind – from love at first sight, to violent encounter – exercise the public imagination (Jackson et al. 2016), but those interactions of the more minimal sort that Goffman draws our attention to warrant further scrutiny. As a cultural sociologist, my proclivities are to resist the desire to find a natural order to interactional conflict between strangers; variations cross-culturally and across contexts suggest that a focus on universals of human interaction could blinker us to the ways that something so simple as the basic spatio-temporal features of an interactional environment or the initiating move, and as complex as the socially ascribed characteristics of interactants, might form both encounters and their interpretations.

The richness of insight into mundane interaction that may be drawn by close inspection of breaches of the ritual of civil inattention suggests that much work is to be done in this domain. This is to say nothing of the urgency of a more fulsome understanding of urban interaction ritual in light of the speed and intensity of planetary urbanization (Brenner 2013) and the consequent ubiquity of stranger interactions. On a rapidly urbanizing planet, questions around the situated production of social order in a world of strangers become ever more pressing.

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